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## Two Montana students win Scholastic Art and Writing Awards

Montana students Jacey Giles and Rebecca Vance won National Medals from the 2014 Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, the nation's largest, longest-running scholarship and recognition program for creative teens. Scholastic, Inc. sponsors the program in partnership with national organizations like the National Writing Project and the National Art Education Association.

From an initial pool of 255,000 submissions, 2,050 works of art and writing earned National Medals. Giles, a student at Fort Benton High School, won for her painting; and Vance, who attends Kalispell Middle School, was recognized for her short story. These students and their educators will be honored at the National Awards Ceremony, June 6 at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

## ARTS EDUCATION

# Belt: Known for beer, basketball – and The Bard

By Emily Kohring  
Director of Arts Education

There are two things a person might know about Belt, Montana, population 597. First, it's home to the State Class C Girls Basketball Champions for three years running. Second, Belt is home to the Harvest Moon Brewing Company, makers of two microbrews served in many Montana establishments – Beltian White and a porter named after the rear end of a pig.

Montanans think of basketball and cowboys and good beer when they think of Belt. One thing they probably don't think about is William Shakespeare.

Belt Valley High School English teacher Jeff Ross would like to change that. With a great love and passion for Shakespeare, but very little formal training in theatre, Ross is slowly transforming the ballroom of an old theatre in downtown Belt into a replica of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, and building an impressive youth Shakespeare program on the western edge of the Montana plains.

On a late March afternoon that should have been much warmer, I visited Ross and his students to watch rehearsal for their upcoming production of "As You Like It."

The old Belt Theatre is dilapidated and cold, and as I climbed the creaky stairs past a leaking pipe I wondered how a play could happen here. Ross met me at the top of the stairs and walked us into the transformed ballroom. It is the only room in the building with heat, and it smelled of fresh paint.

A large, four-inch-thick platform covers most of the floor, with seating for 120 people on raised platforms that Ross built three-quarters of the way around the stage. A large flowered rug was laid out at the front of the stage. "That's where the groundlings will sit," said Ross, referring to the pit in Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London where the non-royalty stood to watch the play.

More likely, it's where Belt kids will sit who want to get a closer view while their parents sit in the more comfortable folding chairs.

The cast entered the ballroom quietly and sat on stage, completely focused and ready to warm up. There are 14 high school students and a seventh grader who have been rehearsing with Ross after school four days a week

since late October. It's been an especially snowy winter on the Hi-Line, which has created a lot of challenges for some students in getting to rehearsal, in addition to conflicts with a multitude of other school activities.

However, as the cast warmed up with Ross, and then listened to his notes from the last rehearsal, they appeared confident and completely ready for the challenge of opening a play in just a few short days.

"A lot of us are walking around on stage as

language, but to express Shakespeare's intent in action as well as words – something that can be a particular challenge for actors who are new to playing Shakespeare. Offstage, they were attentive and focused, watching and learning from what was happening onstage and the coaching Ross was giving them. It was a fun and joyful learning atmosphere.

"As You Like It" is the teacher's second Shakespeare play during his six years in Belt, and his first since traveling to London last summer for the Globe Theatre's Teaching Shakespeare through Performance Program. He joined 21 other teachers from the United States in a month-long professional development program to learn methods of teaching Shakespeare to young people.

The experience was transformational for him, and he now hopes to start a Montana chapter of a Wisconsin-based non-profit program called Young Shakespeare Players. He hopes the program will reach beyond Belt to other students on

the Hi-Line and even Great Falls, and offer after-school and summer Shakespeare classes in an inclusive environment where there are no auditions and everyone gets to participate.

Ross and other members of the Belt community also dream of a full renovation of the long-abandoned Belt Theatre, so that it can be fully utilized as a performance space. Though they've raised some funds to repair a leaking roof, and some interior construction has happened, they are a long way from completion.

Ross has contributed his own money and sweat equity to the construction of the ballroom theatre space, as well as lighting. Costumes for the play were beautifully constructed by his wife, UM biology lab manager Karen Schmidt, and mother-in-law, Evelyn Parrish. A labor of love, no doubt.

But after watching Ross work with his students, I also hope that the fire he ignites in his young cast, and their enthusiasm both for Shakespeare and for theatre will be contagious, and move others to provide this fledgling program the financial resources it needs to grow and thrive.

Who knows? Maybe Belt will someday be famous for basketball, beer – and the Bard.



Belt English teacher Jeff Ross coaches the cast during a rehearsal of "As You Like It."

if we are scripts, not people," Ross told them. "If we don't add something to the language of Shakespeare, nobody in the audience will get it. What do we need to add?"

"Lively action!" the cast shouted back at him.

"How do we get on stage?" he challenged them.

"With energy!"

And with that, cast members jumped up and began running through various scenes that Ross called out.

At one point, the actress playing Phoebe was having trouble getting to the right emotion for a particular moment. Ross tried modeling for her what he wanted, and she still didn't get there. He shouted to the rest of the cast sitting off to the sides, "Come on everyone, let's help her!"

Immediately, all the cast members jumped up on stage in a semi-circle around Phoebe and her acting partner, silently surrounding her with their energy and support, until she got the moment. It was remarkable to see how tightly knit the ensemble was and the level of professionalism they displayed.

Onstage, Ross had clearly worked with them in rehearsal not only to understand the

## ARTS ED BRIEFS

### Poetry Out Loud state champion crowned in Helena

The Poetry Out Loud State Finals were held March 8 at the Myrna Loy Center in Helena after being delayed a week due to the blizzard that hit Montana in early March.

Eighteen finalists competed from across the state for the opportunity to represent Montana in the National Finals in April in Washington, DC. Congratulations to our 2014 champion, Sowmya Sudhaker from Butte High School, and runners-up Darcie Caldwell and Savannah Smith, both from Helena High School. We wish Sowmya the best of luck at the National Finals.

Read more about her on the Big Sky Arts Ed blog. And learn more about Poetry Out Loud at [www.poetryoutloud.org](http://www.poetryoutloud.org).

### Applications open for Artists in Schools and Community FY15 Grants

The Montana Arts Council began taking applications for its FY15 Artists in Schools and Communities grant program on April 15. Grants will be available to Montana schools, arts organizations and other community organizations with not-for-profit status for arts learning projects that strengthen



Poetry Out Loud champion Sowmya Sudhaker is flanked by runners-up Savannah Smith (left) and Darcie Caldwell (right).

(Photo by Robyn Duff)

participants' knowledge and skills in the arts.

Artists in Schools and Communities Grant updated guidelines for projects occurring between July 1, 2014-June 30-2015 were posted on the MAC website by early April. The grant application process is online at [art.mt.gov](http://art.mt.gov).

Grant requests may be made for amounts up to \$10,000 and require a 1:1 cash match. Please contact Director of Arts Education Emily Kohring at 406-444-6522 or [ekohring@mt.gov](mailto:ekohring@mt.gov) with questions.